



Helping Your Child Learn Responsible Behavior with activities for children

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What Do We Mean by Responsibility?

None of us is born acting responsibly. A responsible character is formed over time. It is made up of our outlook and daily habits associated with feelings, thoughts, and actions. Responsible people act the way they should whether or not anyone is watching. They do so because they understand that it's right and because they have the courage and self-control to act decently, even when tempted to do otherwise.

We want our children to appreciate the importance of being responsible. We also want them to develop the habits and strength to act this way in their everyday lives. Learning to be responsible includes learning to

- respect and show compassion for others;
- practice honesty as a matter of course;
- show courage in standing up for our principles;
- develop self-control in acting on our principles;
- maintain self-respect.

Respect and Compassion for Others

As part of being responsible, children need to respect and show concern for the well-being of other people. Respect ranges from using basic manners to having compassion for the suffering of others. Compassion is developed by trying to see things from the point of view of others, and learning that their feelings resemble our own.

Daddy, why was Grandma crying?

She is very sad. One of her closest friends just died. Come and sit with me. Do you remember how you felt when your gerbil, Whiskers, died?

I felt sad and lonely.

I'm sure Grandma feels that way, too. Maybe you can think of a way to help her.

I could give her a hug...

That's a great idea! I'm really glad you thought of it.

Respect for others also includes the habit of treating people fairly as individuals, regardless of race, sex,

or ethnic group. As we mature, respect includes realizing that not all our obligations to others, such as caring for a family member who is sick, are chosen freely. And it includes tolerance for people who do not share our beliefs or likes or dislikes, as long as they do not harm others.

These habits are especially important because many of the wrongs people commit result from indifference to the suffering they cause.

Honesty

Honesty means telling the truth. It means not misleading others for our own benefit. It also means trying to make decisions, especially important ones, on the basis of evidence rather than prejudice. Honesty includes dealing with other people and being honest with ourselves.

To understand the importance of being truthful to others, our children need to learn that living together depends on trust. Without honesty, trusting each other becomes impossible.

Honesty with ourselves involves faring up to our own mistakes and biases, even when we have to admit them to others. It includes self-criticism. The point is to learn from our errors and to do our best to correct them, not to dwell on them.

Courage

Courage is taking a position and doing what is right, even at the risk of some loss. It means being neither reckless nor cowardly, but faring up to our duties. It includes physical courage, intellectual courage to make decisions on the basis of evidence, and moral courage to stand up for our principles.

Courage does not mean never being afraid. It can involve trying to overcome our fears, such as a fear of the dark. But our children also need to learn that sometimes it is all right to be afraid.

Daddy, a man showed us money by the school playground today.

What did you do?

We ran for the teacher.

Why did you do that?

We were scared. You and Mommy and our teacher Mrs. Jones said never take anything from grownups we don't know. Run away. Go and tell somebody we know.

Good for you. It was right to be scared. Lots of people are nice, but some are very mean. They can hurt you. The mean ones sometimes try to fool people by pretending to be nice. Now, tell me, what did the man look like?

Courage becomes especially important by the time children become teenagers. They often have to stand up against peer pressure to do the wrong thing, such as using drugs.

Self-Control

Self-control is the ability to resist inappropriate behavior in order to act responsibly. It relates to all of the different aspects of responsibility mentioned so far, including respect and compassion for others, honesty, and courage. It involves persistence and sticking to long-term commitments. It also includes dealing effectively with emotions, such as anger, and developing patience.

Self-Respect

People with self-respect take satisfaction in appropriate behavior and hard-won accomplishments. They don't need to put others down or have a lot of money in order to respect themselves. People who respect themselves also view selfishness, loss of self-control, recklessness, cowardice, and dishonesty as wrong and unworthy of them. As they mature, if they have learned the lessons of responsibility, they will develop a good conscience to guide them.

In addition, people who respect themselves respect their own health and safety. Similarly, they are unwilling to be manipulated by others. Patience or tolerance does not mean allowing others to mistreat us.

While we help children have high standards for themselves, we also need to let them know that failure is no embarrassment when we have done our best. For example, losing a game when we have played our best, and our opponents have simply played better, is no disgrace.

How Can Parents Encourage Responsible Behavior?

Everyday Experiences

Especially when they are young, children learn best about responsibility in concrete situations. What they do and what they witness have lasting effects. Most of the activities described in this book are for you and your child.

We are always teaching our children something by our words and actions. They learn from seeing. They learn from hearing. They learn from overhearing. They learn from us, from each other, from other adults, and by themselves.

All of us acquire habits by doing things over and over again, whether in learning to play a musical instrument, to pick up after ourselves, to play games and sports, or to share with others. The best way to encourage our children to become responsible is to act as responsibly as we can in their presence. We must genuinely try to be the sort of people we hope they will try to become.

We can show them by our words and by our actions that we respect others. We can show them our compassion and concern when others are suffering. They need to see our own self-control, courage, and honesty. They need to learn that we treat ourselves, as well as others, with respect, and that we always try to do our best. As they grow older, they should have the chance to learn why we live as we do.

Daddy, why are you leaving that note on the garbage can?

There is broken glass inside, Matthew, and I don't want the garbage collectors to get hurt because of me. I am warning them about the glass.

Are they your friends?

No. I don't know them.

But you don't want them to get hurt...

As our children watch us daily, as we talk to them, encouraging their questions and trying to answer them thoughtfully, they begin to understand us--and we begin to understand them. Understanding each other well is the best way to teach our children respect for our ideals of good character.

Using Literature and Stories

Children learn about responsibility through many activities, including reading stories. They learn by identifying with individual characters or because the message from a favorite story strikes a particular chord. Children can be touched deeply by good literature, and they may ask to have things read to them again and again.

Children can learn all sorts of lessons from stories. They might learn about courage by reading about David standing up to Goliath. Or they might learn the value of persistence and effort from *The Little Engine That Could*.

When they are older, reading can help prepare children for the realities and responsibilities of adulthood. It is usually better for children to read a good book about such things as war, oppression, suicide, or deadly disease before seeing these things up close.

When our children grow up they often remember stories that were told to them by family members when they were young. When we tell stories to our children, we should remember old favorites of ours, like *The Three Little Pigs*, not leaving out a single time the wolf says, "I'LL HUFF, and I'LL PUFF, and I'LL BLOW YOUR HOUSE IN!"

Developing Judgment and Thoughtfulness